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# INAUGURAL ADDRESS

AT THE CONVENING OF THE

## MEDICAL SOCIETY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK,

FEBRUARY 1st, 1859.



BY THOMAS C. BRINSMADE, M. D.,  
PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY.

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## INAUGURAL ADDRESS.

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GENTLEMEN OF THE SOCIETY—I assume the duties of the position with which you have honored me with unfeigned diffidence, with a sincere wish to meet your approbation, and with a desire to do all in my power to make our meeting pleasant and profitable.

I should be wanting in all that gives dignity to gratitude, if I should fail to thank you, most cordially, for the very gratifying manner in which you conferred upon me an office which I am fully conscious I am unworthy to occupy.

I have had but little experience in presiding at public assemblies, but I have taken some pains to inform myself in regard to parliamentary rules and practices, and with the kind forbearance and assistance which I doubt not I shall receive from every member, I trust that the business of the society will proceed in an orderly and efficient manner, and that this session will be characterized by good feeling, gentlemenlike bearing, and creditable usefulness.

I am happy at this early hour of the meeting to see so many familiar faces and some new ones, and I would congratulate the former upon their health and ability to reassemble in this place to interchange feelings and thoughts, and I cordially welcome to our fellowship and privileges, those who for the first time have come hither to participate in our deliberations and enjoyments.

A resolution of the society makes it the duty of the president to state the condition of the medical profession of the State, with such suggestions in relation to its improvement as he shall deem appropriate.

I shall proceed as briefly as possible, to relate what I know of the condition of the profession, and to make the few suggestions which I shall offer for your consideration.

I congratulate the Society on the steady increase of its prosperity, and the extension of its reputation and usefulness. As it is one of the oldest, largest and most active of any of the State Medical Societies, and as some of the most important progressive movements in the profession have originated in it, or have been started by its members, its operations are watched with more attention than those of some others.

The last volume of its Transactions has received many very favorable notices from various sources of the highest respectability, in other states

and countries, as well as in our own, and the future volumes, as they shall increase in value from the accumulation of facts, and from rational deductions, will be looked for with increased interest. The Society may feel assured, that as long as they continue to manifest their wonted zeal and judgment in promoting the advancement of professional knowledge, so long will their labors be appreciated by the profession and public. I say the public as well as the profession, for I am informed by members of the Legislature, and others, that the Transactions of this Society are more generally desired and valued, than most of the other public documents which the State so liberally publishes and distributes. The liberality of the State in this particular, has elicited commendation and admiration in other states, and its example will perhaps be followed by them; at least I am informed that it will be presented to other legislatures with that view.

The transactions for several years past will compare favorably with those of "The London Medical and Chirurgical Society," when its council was composed of the most distinguished men who adorned the profession at the beginning of the present century, and when its contributors were those whose names are familiar to all as the most able promotores of medical improvement.

Transactions of medical societies, composed of men of eminent talents, furnish rich materials for the studious inquirer, who is disposed to recognize the superiority of important facts, judiciously selected and systematically arranged, to merely theoretical disquisitions and plausible hypotheses, founded upon only *probable* data. The progress of the discovery of truth by this method may be slow, but certain.

Being convinced that the importance of medical association was not generally appreciated by a large portion of the physicians of the State, and for the purpose of ascertaining the number of those who were members of societies, I have sent circulars, within the last few months, to physicians in every county of the State, requesting them to furnish a statement of the number of physicians in their respective counties, belonging to county societies or voluntary associations. I have received answers from twenty-eight counties. From these returns I learn, that in those counties only a little more than one-half of the regular physicians belong to any medical association, and that the average number who attend the meetings is about one-third. It is probable that similar neglect exists in those portions of the State not heard from, and therefore we are justified in saying, that only one-third of the physicians of the State feel the importance of associating for mutual benefit.

Professor Frank H. Hamilton, in his introductory address in 1856, pointed out, in a very clear and distinct manner, the law in regard to county societies, and the privileges which it confers upon physicians, and their obligations to themselves and to the public to comply with its provisions.

The committee of Kings County Medical Society have also made a very pertinent and conclusive report upon the same subject, which was presented to this Society at its last meeting, and published in the Transactions. The

apathy of the profession seems so great, that I beg leave to call the attention of the Society again to this important subject; and although it may not require any action here, I hope every member, when he shall return to his district, will not fail to present it to the consideration of his medical friends. Many of the gentlemen who replied to my circular, wrote, that since the passage of the law of 1844, an impression has existed in the minds of physicians, that they were under no legal obligations to join the society, and that licensed and graduated physicians derived no legal *privileges* by becoming members. The more general distribution of the report of the Kings County committee would tend to remove this erroneous opinion.

Voluntary associations are doubtless accomplishing much good, particularly the Academy of Medicine and the Pathological Society in the city of New York. But as none of them are represented in this Society (with the exception of the New York Academy of Medicine), their influence is quite local and circumscribed, and they contribute but little to unite the profession in harmonious action and feeling, and their tendency is to destroy county organizations, and consequently to weaken and isolate this.

The tendency of the smaller associations in towns and villages is to produce cliques, and it would be better for the county societies to meet more frequently, and thus give all an opportunity to attend.

If, however, they are sustained for a sufficient length of time to insure permanency, I would suggest that the necessary steps be taken to give them the privilege of a representation in this Society, upon such conditions as may be thought proper.

They will probably be composed of the ablest and best men in the profession, and their delegates would make useful and active members here, and through the medium of this Society they would be in communion with the whole profession.

It may not be uninteresting to the society to be informed of the number of voluntary medical associations in the State, and through the kindness of some gentlemen, I am able to give the following.

Dr. John F. Griscom, of New York, has very obligingly furnished me with an account of the principal voluntary medical associations in the city of New York (obtained by him from the presidents and secretaries of the several societies), all of which are active and doubtless very useful.

*New York Academy of Medicine.*—Number of members nearly three hundred and fifty; average attendance from seventy-five to eighty; meetings held the first and third Wednesdays of each month. In addition to the general meetings of the Academy, the *sections*, now six in number, may be said to constitute separate and distinct societies, though derived from and dependent upon the parent academy. They generally meet monthly, and have interesting discussions.

*Kappa Lambda of Hippocrates.*—Has twenty-four members; average attendance, twelve; meets monthly at the dwellings of the members, objects, general improvement in medical science.

*New York Pathological Society.*—Has nearly one hundred members;

average attendance about thirty-five ; meets the second and fourth Wednesdays of the month ; objects, study of pathology by specimens and written reports of cases, and general discussions ; a very active society.

*Harvifian Circle.*—Fifteen members ; average attendance nine ; meets monthly at the houses of members ; objects, general cultivation of medical science.

*New York Medical Association.*—Number of members limited to twenty ; present number belonging to it seventeen ; average attendance eight ; meets on the second and fourth Mondays, at the residences of the members ; objects, improvement in all branches of medical science.

*Society of Statistical Medicine.*—Number of members thirty ; average attendance twelve ; meets monthly ; objects, the cultivation and collection of statistics in every department of medicine, and also the reading and discussion of papers, and exhibition of specimens.

*New York Medical Union.*—Number of members twenty-eight ; average attendance fifteen ; meets the second Saturday evening of every month ; objects, reading of papers, presentation of cases, and delivery of lectures.

Dr. John R. Van Kleeck, president of the New York County Medical Society, writes : “The interest and vitality of the ‘regular physicians,’ have been mostly diverted from the County Medical Society to the Academy of Medicine; although we have as yet kept up the organization of the County Medical Society.”

Dr. Nathaniel Miller, of Long Island, writes : “At the time the law of 1813 went into operation, most of the physicians of the county attached themselves to the society. They are all dead but myself, now in my seventy-fifth year. We have at least three practitioners in the country where we had one forty years ago.”

I read this letter of Dr. Miller’s, as it exhibits the indifference of physicians in regard to associations, and a remarkable instance of vigorous activity at an advanced age, which ought to be recorded.

In the village of Elmira there is an association called “The Elmira Academy of Medicine,” with ten members. It meets every month ; object, medical improvement. Dr. Way, of Elmira, informs me, “that this organization has, with the village practitioners, virtually, but not actually, taken the place of the Chemung County Medical Society.

Dr. J. G. Orton writes that the Binghamton Academy of Medicine numbers ten members ; average attendance seven.

The South Central Association has one hundred members ; average attendance sixty ; meets annually.

Dr. H. Hamilton informs me that the Buffalo Medical Association has forty members ; average attendance fourteen ; meets monthly.

Dr. J. E. West writes that the Utica Medical Club numbers fifteen members ; average attendance ten ; meets every fortnight.

I am informed by the secretary that the early volumes of the “Transactions” are very frequently wanted by members of the Society and others, and that he is unable to supply them. I would therefore suggest, that the

committee on publication be authorized to select such articles from the earlier volumes, now out of print, as they may deem most worthy of preservation, and have them reprinted in a supplement to the next volume. A portion might be printed this year, and others in subsequent years. Some of the papers might be published entire, and if the authors are living, they might be revised, or an abstract of others might be made, like the abridgement of the Philosophical Transactions, and disposed and arranged under general heads.

Dr. Fisher has done a good work, and merited the thanks of the Society, which were voted him, in arranging the titles of the articles from his own complete set, but the enumerations of the subjects, with the names of the authors, excites a desire to see a more full account of them. If the addresses of the presidents, for the first fifty years, could be published in a separate volume, it would be an appropriate memorial of the authors and of the society, and as most of them were delivered before partially popular audiences, they would be interesting to many general readers, as well as to the profession. It would make a volume of only five or six hundred pages, and if distributed by members of the Legislature, and other, as extensively as public documents sometimes are, the expression of the principles of the profession, its duties and claims, which many of them eloquently present, would be widely disseminated.

It would be very satisfactory and profitable if an interchange of Transactions and proceedings of other State societies could be effected by the secretary, that a knowledge of the labors of the several States might be diffused.

A means of elevating the standard of medical education, and of increasing the dignity of the profession, has been proposed to the Society at some of its former meetings, but no decided expression has been obtained upon the subject. I allude to the institution of a second degree in the medical profession. The power to confer such a degree could be vested in the same boards which now grant the degree of Doctor of Medicine, or a special board might be constituted, for the purpose of examining candidates for the honor. It is singular that a man in the medical profession should obtain his highest title at the very beginning of his career, and that in this respect all should be honored alike. In theology and law it is different, the titles of Doctor of Divinity and Doctor of Laws are not acquired until the recipients have earned them by years of study and practice.

The name of the highest degree might be Doctor of Medicine, and that of the first Bachelor of Medicine; or the first might be the same as it is now, and the second termed the honorary. Whatever the first degree might be called, it should be conferred only upon the same prerequisites in regard to preliminary and medical education which are at present insisted upon by colleges and censors, and it should give the same right to practice that the degree of Doctor of Medicine does under the existing order of things.

The practitioner would then have as high a position as he now has, his privileges would be the same, and the public would be as well protected.

After three years of a prescribed course of study, with hospital or private praeticee, the candidate for the second degree should be required to present himself for a second examination.

The medical colleges and schools can have no objection to the measure, as many who should desire to obtain the distinction would doubtless avail themselves of the advantages which these institutions offer. A course of lectures, and opportunity for observation in hospitals, would be much more profitable to, and appreciated by, the conscientious man, desirous of improvement, after having experienced for a few years the trials and disappointments with which every young physician will inevitably meet. The withholding of the higher title for a few years would at least be an inducement for him to continue his studies for a time after his first graduation, and by not ceasing to be a student immediately upon his entrance into active life, perhaps a habit might be established which would last.

It is well known that graduates from the medical colleges are not admitted to the position of surgeons or assistant surgeons in the army and navy, until they have passed a very rigid examination by an impartial board.

Is it more oppressive to require the young physician in private praeticee, to gain his honors and station by study and observation, than it is for the young army or naval surgeon? Or are the lives of civilians less valuable than those of soldiers and sailors?

Probably no method has been proposed, better tended to exalt the character and standing of physicians, than this, and it is one which will be sooner or later adopted.

I have thought this an appropriate time to bring it before this Society, that they might consider the propriety of presenting it to the convention of the professors of the medical schools of the country, which is to be held at Louisville, on the day previous to the meeting of the American Medical Association in May next, to devise a uniform system of medical education, in the form of a memorial, resolutions, report of a committee, or in whatever manner they may judge proper.

If the society should see fit to join in the movement, initiated by the State Medical Society of New Jersey, its influence would undoubtedly be weighty, and it would add to the reputation which it has already acquired for advocating as well as suggesting valuable reforms in the profession.

I am informed by some professors of the medical colleges, that many students present themselves at their institutions wholly unable, from the want of preliminary education, to profit by the advantages which are provided for them. Many physicians receive into their offices, and encourage to enter the profession, young men whose early mental training has been so imperfect, as to afford no reasonable expectation that they will be useful in the profession. It would therefore seem the duty of the State society to reiterate its advice to county societies, and to physicians generally, to discourage all aspirants to medical degrees, whose ability, education, or habits

of application, do not give the promise of a respectable standing in the profession.

The six medical schools in the State are all adding every year facilities for the acquisition of knowledge, and they have the confidence of the profession. The average number of graduates has not varied materially for the last three years. There are five medical journals published in the State, and three republished.

They are all conducted with ability, and are effecting much good, by diffusing information throughout the country, and by affording opportunities for those who are disposed, to contribute the results of their observation and study to the common good. It is readily noticeable from the character of the medical periodical press, that there is an increase of zeal among all physicians in the pursuit of knowledge, and that the tone of professional morality is becoming more elevated. From what I have been able to learn of the present condition of the medical profession of this State, I am confident that it now occupies a higher position in the estimation of the medical world, and in that of the public, than at any former period of its history.

The profession of this State was ably represented at the meeting of the American Medical Association, in Washington, in May last, and as many delegates from this Society were present as at any former meeting, except that held in the city of New York.

About one hundred copies of the Transactions were sent to my care at Washington, to distribute to the members of the American Medical Association. I was assisted in the distribution by several members of the delegation from this State, and they were mostly given to gentlemen from other States, by whom they were received with grateful acknowledgments.

It is very desirable that a full delegation from this Society should be sent to the great central Association of the profession; and the object might be accomplished, if the gentlemen who wish to attend the next meeting at Louisville, and can now promise to go, would send their names to the nominating committee.

With an apology for occupying so much time, I now announce that the Society is ready for business.

